DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 217 517 EA 014 621

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TITLE Serving Many Masters: Dilemmas in School-University Collaborations.
PUB DATE 23 Mar 82
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Agency Cooperation; Change Strategies; *College School Cooperation; Consultants; *Cooperative Planning; Cooperative Programs; Educational Change; Educational Researchers; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Institutional Cooperation; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Organizational Climate; Organizational Effectiveness; Personality Traits; School Personnel; Social Scientists

ABSTRACT

Collaborations between one medium-sized urban school district and different academic departments in a large public university, an Ivy League university, and a small graduate school of education were studied to identify factors that either impede or hasten collaboration between university social scientists and public school educators. Forty-two indepth interviews were conducted with individuals from the participating institutions. Regardless of the nature of the collaborative effort, its success was seen entirely as a function of the interpersonal relationships between university staff and school personnel. The key ingredient in successful working relationships was individual personality and not the collaborator's organizational affiliation or academic or professional training. Impediments to collaboration were found to be teachers caught between university guidelines for change and school system procedures. In addition, university people caused friction by skipping over mid-level administrators and principals to deal directly with teachers. The findings suggest a desire on the part of school personnel to work with a team of collaborators, and make clear the necessity of careful and explicit planning for interagency collaborative efforts on many different levels. (Author/MLF)

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Serving Many Masters:

Dilemmas in School-University Collaborations

Yale Child Study Center

New Haven, Connecticut

Richard A. Sussman

American Educational Research Association

Annual Meeting Presentation

New York City

March 23, 1982

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Serving Many Masters: Dilemmas in School-University Collaborations

The research I would like to present today is one small piece of the work undertaken by the Schools Group directed by Dr. James Comer at the Yale Child Study Center. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Comer for allowing me to pursue aspects of his research that were of particular interest to me.

The title of my presentation, "Serving Many Masters," reflects a set of problems which have been relatively ignored in the research literature on educational collaboration. Much has been written describing various elements of the school change process that involve both public school educators and university researchers working in concert with each other. From an analysis of these programs, theorists have generated countless prescriptions for creating change in our schools and, further, have suggested a variety of avenues for developing more fruitful collaborative relationships. Yet, little of this information describes what I see as a major difficulty. Collaboration, as experienced by school personnel, places them directly in the middle of two opposing viewpoints; that of their home school and district and that of the university collaborator.

I do not mean to imply that all collaborative activity between educators and university researchers has placed school staff in this uncomfortable position, but rather that a great deal of the past work has failed to acknowledge the potential for placing school personnel in between the proverbial "rock and the hard place." In our zeal to be of assistance and to bring about meaningful change, whether working directly with teachers or principals, we have, perhaps unconciously, overloaded school personnel with

recommendations and directives. All too frequently our suggestions have been in conflict with the values, goals, and policies of the public school. In many of these instances, we have made this error because we lacked a clear understanding of the workings of the local school and larger school district. We have, for example, been unaware of the ways in which teachers learn to cope with inadequate supplies, confront the limitations of the daily schedule, or more to the point, redirect their creativity in order to work around firm policies of a rigid central administration. As we were not aware of these strategies, we made suggestions and gave instructions that were virtually impossible to follow. A good illustration of this point is reflected in the story told to me by a fourth grade teacher who worked for many months on the development of a new reading program with the university consultant assigned to her school. Almost simultaneous to the completion of their project, the teacher was informed by the District Office that a new system-wide approach to reading instruction would be instituted. She reported feeling clearly torn between her newly developed, custom-made method and the recommended new District approach.

We have found in our research that the demands of collaboration impact dramatically on the lives and activities of people in schools. We do, however, remain committed to the belief that collaboration is more than worth the effort it requires. We have found the products of collaboration to be tremendously valuable and that most individuals who have participated in collaborative programs report their willingness and eagerness to engage in further joint activity. My point is simply that for teachers and principals, participation in collaboration remains a mixed blessing. I might also add, and I will return to this point later, that collaboration also has profound effects on many of us in the university.

Investigators have defined collaboration in many different ways. Most recently, there has been a clear distinction made between collaboration and cooperation. Hord (1980) describes the difference this way:

> " Cooperation is a model wherein one institution is primarily involved in the task; the second institution has helped identify the problem or given sanction for doing so. In contrast, the products of collaboration are jointly owned and meet the needs of both institutions."

Last year, researchers at the Northwest Regional Laboratory produced a list of features that were found to make up successful collaborations. They included such items as maintaining a narrow focus, involving highly committed members, encouraging an active interest in program goals rather than passive good will, and developing an egalitarian approach to planning, resource allocation and goal setting. These recommendations are congruent with other research literature.

Descriptions of collaborative programs abound in the literature. What is common to many of the examples is the disparity between the academic and practical perspectives of the two collaborators. In many of these cases, what has been shown is that the language, experiences, and day to day working realities are vastly different for each group. Clearly, the autonomy and independence of the academic position has no counterpart in the public school. The inflexibility of the daily school schedule is dramatically different from freedom of the academic calendar. Research has also pointed to differences in the professional objectives, values, and personal goals of university and school people.

We undertook the present study for a number of reasons. Even though I will be concentrating on one particular aspect of the research, I would like to mention the two other major facets of the study so that you can see where the few findings I am reporting on today fit into the overall research design. Our project sought to illustrate that when academic social scientists and public school educators do collaborate (in the fullest sense of the word), there exists a phenomenon which can be termed "reciprocity of knowledge". From analyzing examples of reciprocity, we sought to uncover a pattern by which each participant barters and shares resources in an effort to get information exchanged to the mutual advantage of each. Secondly, we sought to use an advisory board of university and public school educators as a mini-model of collaborative research activity. Our third objective, was to describe the culture, traditions, training and reward systems of university social scientists and public school educators so that we might learn which of these elements tend to affect the collaborative process. We sought to uncover which of a wide range of variables either impede or hasten collaboration. It is from these data that I report to you the findings that pertain to what might be termed the "Scylla and Charybdis" problem.

We targeted our research efforts on three ongoing university-public school collaborations within one medium sized urban school district. Three different universities were studied as collaborating institutions. Each represented a distinct type of institution. They were a large public university, an Ivy League university, and a small private Graduate School of Education. In addition, within each of these institutions, the locus of responsibility fell in different academic departments, such as a graduate department in education or a child clinical branch of a medical school.

I must add here that, in part, this was a self-study. For the past ten years, our research group had been involved in a major school project. The initial development of this project was our attempt to take a step backwards and look at ourselves, focusing on our past successes and failures. We broadened the scope of the project when we realized how much could be gained from an analysis of how collaboration functioned across different university involvements within one school district.

The projects under investigation had a variety of overall objectives, including leadership training for principals, mental health skills training for staff and parents, the use of a broad based social skills curriculum and a child centered educational enrichment program for elementary grades. Our collaborative efforts first began when we enlisted the participation of the two other universities. I will return to this point later because it bore heavily on our research methodology and on the ultimate implications of our research, significantly more than we originally imagined.

Forty two in depth interviews were conducted with individuals from the participating institutions including teachers, principals, parents paraprofessionals, central school system personnel and university researchers, trainers and consultants. We divided the subjects into three categories: university personnel, central school administration and faculty, staff, and parents from the local school. Interview protocals were developed with open ended questions. All subjects received the identical interview regardless of their role, representative group, or collaborative project. In essence, a 3 X 3 matrix was developed comparing collaborative project by group. Even though the project was structured in this way, we ultimately analyzed our data by combining the subjects from

all three projects and examining the data according to the role of the individual. Our decision to make this change was made for two very important reasons, one methodological and the other political, and speaks directly to some of my concerns about collaboration with other universities.

On purely methodological grounds we did not have sufficient numbers of people in all of our cells. In the central administration group, where subjects were the same school officials responsible for each of the three collaborations, we considered it particularly inappropriate to compare subjects against themselves. In addition, we found that the questions, originally designed to elicit responses specific to each project under investigation, were extremely difficult for administrators to answer. Central administrators were interviewed only once concerning their overall impressions of collaboration. Responses specific to particular projects were encouraged if it added to our understanding of how the administration functioned with different university collaborators. We received little of this type of information. Although the issues surrounding the sampling of central administrators was an important methodological problem in the original design, it was overshadowed by the larger fact that the research, in order to be successful, could not be perceived as an evaluation or comparison of the three programs.

As we began developing the project, we quickly realized that our interest in critically examining the collaborative relationships needed to be put in a more palatable form for our colleagues at other universities. We were rather naive in our understanding of the "climate" that surrounds university collaborations in this or any other school district. In our

initial negotiations with the other universities we had not been particularly careful in how we described our research in order to avoid threatening our fellow collaborators. It was not our intention to place the three collaborations in competition with each other(even though there may have been some interest on the District's part for our doing so). We quickly learned that in a time of limited financial resources, and diminishing school district contracts, that fear plays a major role in the willingness to participate in a research project such as ours. In part, our university collaborators participation as if they were "damned if they did and damned if they didn't." How would the central administration of the school system read their lack of participation? How will they fare relative to the next guy? We ultimately negotiated the involvement of the other universities keeping an awareness of their heightened sensitivity very much in our minds. This long explanation of what might be painfully obvious is simply to say that the current political climate had sufficient effect to both force us to adopt a particular methodological stance in analyzing our data and to color how we developed, executed and publicized the findings of our study.

Subjects responded to interview questions assessing such issues as:

of 3;Does the different training of social scientists and public school educators impede collaboration?

Does the involvement of central administration hasten the collaborative process?

We found that regardless of the nature or focus of the collaborative effort, the success of the collaboration was seen entirely as a function of the interpersonal relationships between university staff and school

personnel. The key ingredient in successful working relationships between public school people and university staff was individual personality and not the organizational affiliation of the collaborator or his academic or professional training. The findings did not suggest a particular type of person who was best suited for collaboration but rather a desire on the part of school people to work with a team of collaborators.

Pertinent to my opening remarks, all groups, administrators, researchers and local school people reported that the involvement of central school administration was crucial to the success of the project. However, a consistently cited impediment to collaboration was the problem of serving more than one master. It was not uncommon for us to hear from teachers that they were caught between university guidelines for change and school system procedures. They were given suggestions by university consultants which were in contradiction to school policy or program. The complexity of the inter-relationships between school staff, central office administrators and university personnel was indeed a major obstacle to successful collaborative relationships. We attributed some of this finding to the difficulties inherent in the collaborative situation where normal roles and responsibilities of each group within the school become less clear. In these situations, the formal and informal rules that guide the normal school day are put into question.

Concretely, we found that university people tended also to skip over mid-level administrators and principals to deal directly with teachers. In doing so, university consultants not only were the cause of considerable friction within the school but also cut themselves off from a better understanding of the school setting. It is also important to mention in

light of these apparent difficulties that most respondents saw collaboration as a maturing process; one in which each participant came to not only know and understand what to expect from their collaborator but also how to negotiate through these difficulties. Thus, for most respondents, the problem of "many masters" was an initial problem and one that found resolution over time.

The findings of this study make clear the necessity of careful and explicit planning for interagency collaborative efforts on many different levels. A great deal of care must be given to the development of the collaborative relationship, not only with teachers in the classroom, but with local school administrators and with District personnel as well. Good inter-personal relationships are indeed necessary for successful collaboration, but insufficient when not accompanied by equally positive inter-group relations among collaborators. Our experience has underscored the importance of continually keeping in mind the "political climate" in which the research or consultation occurs. A sensitivity to the ecology of the school setting and the potentially difficult position of those to whom we consult, is of utmost importance. Time and talent can be seriously wasted when our consultation engenders paralysis rather than growth.